

【연구논문】

Return of the “Great Absentee”: the
Perilous Positionality of Asian
American Fatherhood in Gus Lee’s
China Boy and *Honor and Duty**

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“Chinamans do make lousy fathers.”
- Frank Chin, *Chickencoop Chinaman*

“As long as you can, you will please the father,
the most holy and fragile animal.”
- Chang-Rae Lee, *Native Speaker*

In an interview, Gus Lee remarked that he intentionally wrote his father out of his semi-autobiographical novel *China Boy* (1991); Lee candidly acknowledged that in lieu of telling the “truth” and demonizing his father as the “bad guy,” he opted to place the senior Lee within the ranks of other postwar fathers, who were “archetypally absent” from the homestead (Guthman C-1; Connell 10).¹⁾ For this

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1) For the most part, Lee’s *China Boy* and *Honor and Duty* draw heavily on his own experience; an older and wiser Kai narrates as he reflects back on his formative years with a more informed perspective. Labeling his works as “semi-autobiographical novels,” Lee explains that even as taps into his own life for the plots of his

reason, K. F. Ting makes his mark simply as an “absentee father” in the Ting household.²⁾ *China Boy*, however, is not wanting in father-figures. In fact, this is a novel overrun with proxy fathers, who compete against K. F. as the topmost role model for Kai as he struggles to survive a troubled childhood in the black ghetto. Therefore at the core of this novel is Kai’s quest for the consummate father who can induct him into American manhood and bestow its bounties upon him.

Leaving aside for now Lee’s contrivance to “soft-pedal” the portrayal of his father in *China Boy*, the Asian American father remains a tangential figure within the context of American manhood and occupies a precarious position in the coterie of hegemonic men (Guthman C-1). The historical narrative of Asian America offers countless examples – from the bachelor societies to bans on interracial marriages – of how its men were frustrated from the onset in accessing patriarchal and

narratives, he took creative license to alter certain details so that he may safeguard the privacy and the dignity of his family. Despite such admission, Lee makes it difficult to demarcate fact from fiction by conflating himself with the narrator Kai who, at times, appears to be omniscient, which provokes allegations of “artlessness” in his works (Phelan 61). While Lee’s works should not be depreciated on those grounds alone, I observe moments in both texts, in which Lee interjects himself into the story at the risk of compromising the literariness of his works. One indication is Lee’s differing behavior towards Kai in the hood and Kai at West Point, which is extremely telling of narrator Kai’s (who is an approximation of Lee) ambivalence towards hegemonic discourse. A more exigent matter to address in a critical reading of Lee’s works, then, is not a categorization of what’s real and what’s imagined but an interrogation of the manner in which Lee beguiles, to a certain extent, his actual ideology of minority survival in a majoritarian society.

- 2) Lee’s texts seemingly utilize chapter titles as indicators of people, places, and events that occupy a significant position in Kai’s life. As a small detail, the noticeably missing chapter devoted to “Father” in *China Boy* speaks volumes by indicating K. F.’s absence from his young son’s life. Lee finally assigns a chapter to K. F. in *Honor and Duty*, which appears only after Kai starts school at West Point, which is “filled with sons of ambitious fathers. [West Pointers] are all platforms for their [fathers’] hopes, their ambitions. West Point is a father’s totem” (*Honor* 363).

hence masculine authority. On the one hand, Asian American fathers have been disempowered and thus extirpated from the masculine culture. On the other hand, prevailing depictions relegate these men as despotic patriarchs who are stringent enforcers of the Law; they are commonly portrayed as intimidating, distant, and dismissive tyrants who demand undue respect and browbeat their families into submission. Though not quite included into the national body, Asian American fathers have nonetheless become complicit in the hegemonic oppression of other minority subjects who are already demoralized by racism.

Lee's first novel recounts the poignant coming-of-age story of Kai Ting and trails this lonely "China boy" through the rough-and-tumble neighborhood of the San Francisco Panhandle in the 1950s. Conflicted and tenuous is Kai's relationship with his "lousy" Chinese immigrant father who aspires to be a model minority. In contrast to his assimilationist father, young Kai, who dreams of becoming a black boy like his best buddy Toos, undertakes a campaign of resistance under the guidance of other ethnic fathers who assist Kai on a rigorous path to American manhood. Unlike K. F., Kai embraces blackness as a method to gain masculine privileges and freedoms; recognizing the shared affliction of racially marginalized people, Kai endeavors to transfigure his Asian Americanness with blackness in order to confound and disrupt the oppressor's logic, to which K. F. willingly subscribes.³⁾ In effect, father and son devise contradictory survival strategies to reconcile with their marginality in American society; with a

3) Ting Senior is inconsistently referred to as T. K. in *China Boy* and K. F. in *Honor and Duty*. In this chapter, I refer to Kai's father as K. F. I hypothesize Lee corrected T. K. to K. F. in the sequel. I base this on the fact that the father's given name is indicated as "Kuo-fan" elsewhere (*China* 8).

white wife in tow, K. F. takes a “major-league step toward cementing the American assimilation” (58). Conversely, Kai sets his sights on becoming a black Panhandle “streetfighta,” whose struggles on the street are, according to Kai, “really an effort to fix identity” (2, 3). Gus Lee, therefore, establishes the black ghetto of postwar San Francisco as a constructive site for Kai, who undergoes a violent rite of passage through the “realm of the fist” into manhood (66). Likewise the overabundance of would-be fathers for Kai underscores the paternal powerlessness of the Asian American father in Kai’s masculinization.

Lee resumes Kai’s story in *Honor and Duty* (1994); in this sequel, Kai enters West Point upon his father’s wishes even as his struggles to reconcile with K. F. continue. It is at West Point, arguably the quintessential hub of hegemonic men (read: white, middle-class, educated, and heterosexual), that Kai reconsiders and ultimately aborts his initial dependence on blackness to reclaim his masculinity. Osmosing the rhetoric of dominant discourse, Kai shifts his allegiance from other men of color to the fraternity of hegemonic men, and in so doing, Kai restores the previously compromised authority of his Asian American father.

Read in tandem, Lee’s two novels not only galvanize critical discourse on the complexities involved in a minority subject’s reconciliation with the hegemony but also elucidate the intricate mechanism of Asian American identity formation and of Lee’s ambivalence towards Asian American fathering in its convoluted process. While most reviews on Lee’s novels have been inclined to focus on Kai’s contentious relationship to whiteness as embodied by his stepmother, Edna McGurk Ting, I contend that we must foreground Kai’s toxic relationship with his model minority father who, to a

greater extent, guards himself and his history from Kai and inadvertently colludes to keep his son's masculinity in check. K. F. further establishes himself as a hegemonic proxy by tacitly consenting to Edna's brutality against his children; I observe K. F.'s acquiescence to Edna's abuse as evidence that his social invisibility has been reassigned to the Ting household. Edna's maniacal efforts to expunge "China" from the boy as well as eject the boy from the Ting home are paralleled by Kai's infirmity in the streets of the Panhandle. For Kai, the streets of the Panhandle therefore signify not only an arena wherein he validates his masculinity by becoming a "streetfighta" but also a safe haven away from white oppression, embodied by Edna.

Still, Lee adumbrates his ambivalence about Kai's defiance against his Asian American father, whose authority is subsequently diminished, by brushing Kai with a touch of comicality. By depreciating Kai's determination to become black as a facetious act, Lee backhandedly dismisses Kai's attempts to disarticulate the majoritarian discourse via appropriating blackness. In *Honor and Duty*, Lee again intimates the limitations of Kai's methods to claim his masculinity via blackness; at West Point, Kai is no longer an awkward and scrawny China boy who has a laughable desire to become a black boy. Instead, he is a charmingly witty and brawny Chinese American cadet whose resolve is to become Mr. All-American. West Point allows Kai to weave himself into the white tapestry of hegemonic masculinity (31), and such a move telegraphs the instability of the ghetto as a formative locus for Asian American masculinization. Within this citadel of hegemonic masculinity, Kai finds himself increasingly drawn to his father's assimilationist strategy as Kai struggles to negotiate his position among his white peers to whom he constantly feels inferior.

In light of Lee's strategic shifts in alliance from black expressions of masculinity in *China Boy* to white ones in *Honor and Duty* and Kai's ostensibly amended position regarding the assimilation/resistance binary, a critical consideration of Asian American fatherhood in the identity formation of an Asian American male subject is a fortiori. One must thence interrogate if Lee perpetuates dominant social structures by portraying a resistant minority subject who, in due course, ingurgitate the Law of the Father.

Such scholars as Viet Thanh Nguyen have identified the inclination within Asian American Studies to see "Asian America as a place of resistance" and therefore valorize literary works that "embody a politics of resistance" rather than those that promote an accommodationist agenda (11). In *China Boy*, this discord between assimilation and resistance is recast as a conflict between a "domesticated" Chinese American dad who is "technically present" but barely so and his "unruly" son who is on the slippery slope of becoming a would-be hoodlum (Pleck 91). Nonetheless, Kai initially goes to great measures to restore K. F.'s patriarchal authority; Kai depicts his father as a larger-than-life manly man who flies airplanes, fixes guns and cars, and is admired by American generals. While Kai does not gloss over K. F.'s absence from the Ting household, he also makes certain that K. F. is not discounted as an "invisible man" in the account of his early childhood. To Kai, his father is "handsome, direct and dashing" and was a "decorated war hero, a former biplane fighter pilot, a paratrooper trained by the American army, an infantryman trained by the Germans" (*China* 46, 69). Seemingly intact, K. F.'s masculinity is colored by his race and is thus compromised in the American context;

his war record, the wealth of his family back in China, his current occupation as a banker, and even his white wife are ultimately insufficient to gain him access to the privileges of hegemonic masculinity.

What's most tragic is that K. F.'s racial castration is self-inflicted; *China Boy* implies that it is specifically K. F.'s assimilationist tendencies that emasculate him. K. F. disassociates himself from the Chinese, who have been feminized by their military defeat and aligns himself instead with the triumphant Americans, whose masculine authority derives from their technologies of violence; old-world wisdom, concludes K. F., is "nothing against an airplane with guns and a pilot who knows how to kill" (54). America comes to signify strength and authority, which K. F. sees as absent from China, whose national fortitude was overthrown by colonial powers.⁴⁾ Kai observes that his father became "increasingly anti-Chinese" and evangelized his "rabid Pro-Americanism" in hopes that "Mei-gwo, the Beautiful Nation, the Pretty Country" will restore his spirits and manhood broken by the war (21, 54, 70).

Although K. F. takes excessive measures to erase his ethnicity and reinvent himself as a standard American by faithfully abiding by the tenets of conventional masculinity, he finds that he still cannot "make himself [a] Ward Cleaver" (12). Furthermore, K. F.'s emasculation is, without a doubt, intensified and complicated by his relationships to Edna, who represents the America that K. F. wants to embrace and be absorbed by. Edna, who had read all of Pearl Buck's novels about

4) Lee also subtly indicates K. F.'s racial castration by noting that he was born in the same month and year as P'u-yi, the ill-fated Last Emperor of China, whose place in history is marked by his powerlessness.

China, is drawn to K. F.'s foreignness and his Oriental "exotica" when they meet at a USO function for veterans and widows (57); subsequently, it is their contrasts - Edna's Nordic features and K. F.'s "Oriental" ones - that bind them together. Still their marriage fails to legitimize K. F.'s masculinity because in hailing K. F. as an "Oriental," Edna italicizes his social prostration and establishes herself as the dominant discourse, which subjugates minority subjects.⁵⁾ Just as K. F. is rendered a "nonperson" in the public sphere, Edna, as the paradigmatic whiteness in *China Boy*, replaces K. F. as the keeper of law and order in the Ting household (*Honor* 238).⁶⁾

On his end, K. F., who sees himself as a "Chinese man [that] could not know the rules of this new nation," forfeits his patriarchal cachet

5) Here, Edna is the inversion of the elusive white woman who grants citizenship to the racial others. Numerous minority male authors have employed white female bodies to represent their ideal of America. In effect, a white female body emblemizes a "trophy," which is awarded to racial (male) others who have succeeded in fully acclimating to white American standards. Patricia Chu observes that "the appearance of desirable but elusive white women in Asian American men's texts marks the struggles of Asian American males to establish identities in which Americanness, ethnicity, and masculinity are integrated [as well as those] to establish their literary authority and a literature of their own" (28).

6) In the dearth of positive depictions of whiteness in *China Boy*, Edna's white female body becomes the site of intersection between whiteness, power, and oppression (Malcolm 414). Kai likens her arrival into the Ting household to "the way the Germans marched into Paris, certain [of] conquest and totally prepared to suppress resistance" (*China* 55-6), and the Ting household is immediately rendered into a battlefield between conflicting cultural ideologies. Shen observes that it is atypical for a white woman to be chosen to articulate and compel hegemonic discourse onto racialized (male) subjectivities (110). Nonetheless, the fact that she is a graduate from Smith and a socialite from "an insular inner circle of elite Philadelphia society," seems to validate her as an apt candidate. Edna executes her subjugation and discipline of the racial other with the utmost competence; in an efficient manner, she presides over Kai and his family as the master of the house. Kai sardonically remarks that Edna "missed her calling when the SS closed its ranks to all comers after the demise of Hitler" (75). Very much like the German SS, Edna is ready to expunge all things "foreign" to "normalize" her domain.

to the "American woman [who] knew all the answers" (*Honor* 239). Kai remarks that he and Janie "lived in an obverse world, where we did not have to wait for Father to return home for imposition of sentence" (*China* 170). K. F.'s masculinity is clearly tied to a different time and place, one that is beyond America. K. F.'s disavowal of his ethnic heritage is, in fact, a rejection of selfhood. Severed from a cultural tradition that can sanction his masculinity, K. F. cannot circumvent his racial castration in the new land.⁷⁾ As Yichin Shen observes, K. F. "offer[s] his phallus as well as his own offspring on the altar of [...] the American goddess"(110). His defeatism, in the end, marks K. F. above all else. Consequently, K. F.'s affiliation to hegemonic masculinity exacerbates the disjunct between father and son; even a commonplace father-son bonding experience of playing catch turns into "ball torture" for Kai (*China* 92). Despite his desperate efforts to make a connection, K. F. is incapable of "decoding" his children, which is not unlike white America's inability to comprehend

7) Edna is also invested in eradicating traces of the Ting's ethnic heritage; Edna destroys the Ting family crate, which contains the remnants of their past: photo albums, Dai-li's wedding gown, which her three daughters had hoped to wear on their wedding day, Kai's Chinese pens and inks, and the Calligraphy of Uncle Shim, and K. F.'s military memorabilia, including his "identity papers, photos and letters from war buddies, his old uniform, and Sam Browne belts" (*China* 85). She demotes the artifacts of a Chinese-American (family) history into "trash," which is "filthy," "foreign," "awful," and "dirty," and these become an "offering to assimilation" (85, 213). Edna's contempt of "uncleanliness" of the family crate is evocative of past racist rhetorics. Rachel C. Lee indicates that during the turn of the century, Asian immigrants were reviled for their supposed "unclean" habits and morals. Mainstream America likened "uncleanliness" to nonconformity to (white) American standards and it speciously steeped the discourse of "uncleanliness" within scientific terminology to "make 'cultural difference' a dirty word." The supposed "unhygienic nature" of the Asian other triggered an irrational fear of infection within white America; accordingly, early Asian Americans were vilified as "carriers of disease" (252). Edna not only severs Kai and his sisters from their ethnic heritage and deters the formation of an Asian American identity, she also further castrates K. F. by discarding his badges of masculinity.

the “inscrutable Orientals” (Takaki 375). Kai, in turn, finds himself slipping away from his father and his incomprehensible messages of assimilation (*China* 182); relegated to a hegemonic proxy, K. F. becomes another force whose authority Kai must subvert and destabilize.

In so far as Edna is a medium by which Lee conveys how racialized (male) subjects are disfigured by the oppressive enforcement of the hegemonic discourse, she offers Kai two ways to survive under the reign of white supremacy: either assimilate (like K. F.) or risk expulsion from the mainstream. Kai locates his father’s social invisibility in his willing acceptance of hegemonic discourse which serves to disempower racialized (male) subjects. He therefore rejects his father’s accommodationist approach to whiteness, and declines both the conditional invitation to inclusion and the violent threats of exclusion that mainstream America extends to people of color. Still Kai prevails in gaining access to American manhood by opting to disarticulate the hegemonic discourse by adopting black expressions of masculinity. Subsequently, Kai’s conflict with his father and white stepmother moves beyond the scope of simple teenage rebellion; Kai’s defiance in fact approximates resistance against forces of white supremacy which persistently undercuts the validity of Asian American subjectivity.

When Edna assures Kai of inclusion, it hinges on the latter’s strict adherence to the edicts of white America. Cognizant that his compliance can only effect effeminacy, Kai constructs a diacritical ingress into American manhood; Kai’s triumphant achievement of masculinity is guided by the encouraging hands of a diverse assembly of ethnic father-figures, who function as conduits in his painful and violent passage into manhood in the streets of a black urban ghetto.

Kai, the "no-question-about-it nonfighter," is bullied daily by the Panhandle streetfighters who dub him "China Boy" to express his "Martian nature" (2, 14, 64). Kai recognizes that in his neighborhood, "China [...] is more bizarre, more remote, than a distant planet" (64). Toussaint (Toos) LaRue, a young African American boy, is the only one who befriends Kai when others seek to trample on this "alien" intruder in the Panhandle. In effect, Toos becomes his black father who ushers Kai into American boyhood by taking the time to show him the ropes, explain things to him, and welcomes him into a loving home and church.

Toos' name evokes Toussaint Louverture, the founding father of Haiti. L'Ouverture (which means "the opening") was added to "Papa Toussaint's" name because many Haitians believed that he opened the way to freedom for their people.⁸⁾ Toos is not unlike his namesake; he is the "Saint of the Streets" who delivers Kai from the murderous hands of his aggressors, both on and off the streets. Describing the "theory of fights" as the main avenue into manhood, Toos encourages Kai to become a "streetfighta" so that he may survive the turbulent world that is white America (2, 98). Under the patronage of Toos, Kai learns how to achieve his objective of becoming an "accepted black male youth in the 1950s" (4). Furthermore, Toos' validation of Kai's blackness garners him acceptance in the forbidding streets of the

8) Louverture's first name, Toussaint, was given to him as he was born on All Saint's Day around 1743. It was not until much later in life (around 1793) that he added "L'Ouverture," or "the opener of the way" to his name. Several hypotheses exist regarding the origin of the name: in addition to the one specified above, another speculation is that Toussaint was "given the name for his uncanny ability to find and exploit openings on the battlefield." Another is that "it may have started as a friendly taunt, referring to the gap in his teeth courtesy of a spent bullet" ("Toussaint Louverture").

Panhandle (*Honor* 17).

Shim *dababa* (Uncle Shim) is another one of Kai's surrogate fathers. A close friend of Mah-mee's, Uncle Shim attempts to reconnect Kai to the age-old culture of China and the wisdom of his Asian heritage. However, as is the case with K. F., Uncle Shim's capacity to help Kai claim his masculinity is limited by his ethnic affiliation and he functions as an extension of K. F., Kai's absentee father. Not unlike K. F., Uncle Shim disappears from Kai's life after Mah-mee's death. In addition, Uncle Shim, who is still enshrined in the past, is oblivious to the daily perils that Kai confronts, and disapproves of Kai's efforts to masculinize himself through an "American" method involving violence. He counsels Kai to follow instead a Chinese model of manhood by embracing the life of a learned and peaceful scholar. Uncle Shim's advice to become a "thinker" offers an alternative model of Asian American masculinity for Kai to emulate; nonetheless, as Tony Barraza points out to Kai, Uncle Shim's method is rather inapt for a boy trying to survive in a place, which will only allow him to live if he fights (235). Towards the end of the novel when Kai's other father-figures come together in support of his match against Big Willie, Uncle Shim as well as K. F. is MIA and is not available to tender his paternal guidance, which Kai frantically seeks. Uncle Shim also evokes the desolate uncles of "bachelor societies," particularly after he takes Kai to meet the twelve elders of Chinatown, who reinforce the notion of Asian American marginalization and emasculation; although Kai is in awe of these "patriarchs [of] grand authority," he also notes that these are lonely old men, who were "shunted ...into solo orbits around uncaring communities, [and] left to remember the past while their days dwindle" (249). Consequently, the figure of

Uncle Shim reiterates the deficiency of Asian American fathers.

Besides Toos and Uncle Shim, the most noteworthy father-figures are the members of the YMCA triumvirate—Tony Barraza, Bruce Punsalong, and Barney Lewis—who, individually and collectively, play a major role in Kai's transformation from "Chicken Little" to a bona fide Panhandle "streetfighta" (*China* 2, 3). Each had endured his own hardship: "They grew up in the depression [and] carried the burden of not being Anglo-Protestants at a time when being different implied inferiority [which] was difficult to challenge" (147). These non-hegemonic men dispense their fatherly advice about how to utilize and conquer pain in the process of masculinization. Contradicting Edna's mindless infliction of pain, Kai's putative fathers impart a valuable lesson of how to use pain constructively to enhance "endurance and [...] the value of victory" within the context of the organized violence of boxing (So 144). In particular, Kai's main boxing instructor, Tony Barraza gives Kai "gold" by sharing his time, experience and offering patience and nourishment to build up the body and soul of his apprentice (*China* 177). Finally, the YMCA itself functions as a proxy father; the organization founded to boost the solidarity of "young, Christian men" is a formative site in which one learns the "manly art of self-defense" (285). The YMCA not only introduces Kai to the "baseline ethos of boyhood," but also embraces Kai within the camaraderie of a fraternal community (256). Thus, Kai's entrance into this incubator of masculinity allows him to regularly rehearse masculine identification.⁹⁾

9) Kai's "putative godfathers" at the YMCA are not exculpated from their shortcomings as fathers. Tony himself is a failed father who is estranged from his own son (*China* 147). Their biggest liability as Kai's primo pater is that they are, in the end, only capable of transferring the hegemonic expression of masculinity via the regimented

Kai's actual achievement of manhood, nonetheless, occurs not within the realm of organized sports but in the anarchic street of the black ghetto via Kai's execution of a "degenerative," "unrestricted," and illegitimate mode of violence (Nguyen 95). Streetfighting is, according to Kai, the final test of manhood: it measures "a boy's courage and test[ing] the texture of his guts, the promise of his nascent manhood, [and] his worthiness to live" (*China* 90). Kai's first bout on the streets is with Jerome Washington. Jerome (a.k.a. Lucky) was one of the "China Boy Bashers," a pack of neighborhood boys specifically organized to torment Kai (92). Though frightened at first, Kai's mounting confidence renders him a "historic rebel [and] a renegade warlord" (271). Kai's first victory against a "tough Basher" garners him acceptance from the other Panhandler boys.

This incident allows us to infer that Kai is masculinized in the streets by his interaction with blackness, all of which are not violent. Several times in *China Boy*, Kai observes the similarities between the Asian/Americans and African Americans. Kai identifies with his black neighbors as he remembers Mah-mee's empathy towards African Americans, who shared in Asian Americans' affliction by war and racism (35, 45). Kai bolsters the black-Asian conjunction by drawing parallels between the Chinese *hwa*, language, and the black patois of the Panhandle, which "depended on inflection and musical tone and were indifferent to conjugation" (63). Kai also considers Toos' mother,

violence of boxing fundamentally "nationalist [and] assimilationist" the science of boxing is problematic for those on the racial margins as it conveys a false sense of order to those who are subjected to the "chaos of a multilingual, multicultural America" (Nguyen 95, So 145). Still, the boxing coaches are tenable as positive father-figures for Kai through their involvement in his regenerative fight with Big Willie on the streets of the Panhandle.

Mrs. LaRue, as Chinese, only "she just didn't *look* it" (138). Kai values the concurring sentiments of the Tings and the LaRues that "honor families, war, percussion, and elders" and discounts their racial differences (63).

In this vein, I argue that even a contentious relationship with blackness has regenerative value for Kai. For example, Kai's conflict with blackness appears in the form of his fight with Big Willie in *China Boy*. Kai makes the grade in the pivotal test of his masculinity by prevailing in his confrontation with Big Willie. Essentially, Big Willie is recognized as the one who invites Kai to American manhood by "inviting [Kai] ta Fist City" (320). Most importantly, Kai's triumph on the street triggers his coup at home against Edna who is the embodiment of the dominant discourse. Notwithstanding the restorative value of violence in Kai's life, Lee aims to erase the negative implications of a black-Asian conflict. For one, the sight of the prostrated Big Willie reminds Kai of Jerome (a.k.a. Lucky)'s mother, Mrs. Washington, who is victimized by an abusive husband. In that moment, Kai no longer sees Big Willie as his persecutor but as a boy demoralized by the harsh way of life in the Panhandle and extends his hand as a conciliatory gesture (317). In addition, Malcolm observes that Lee makes further attempts to solidify the camaraderie among the racial others by having Mrs. LaRue tend to Kai's wounds that Big Willie inflicts (420).

Above all, Kai's constructive interaction with blackness, which is manifest as Toos' steady guidance and enduring presence throughout Kai's formative years, enables him to achieve manhood by the end of *China Boy*. Toos recognizes violence as a necessary evil in order to survive in the urban ghetto and cautions Kai against its misuse. For

instance, when Kai intimidates smaller kids with his boxing prowess, Toos admonishes Kai as a father would a son (274). Toos teaches Kai how to carry himself like a man and shake someone's hand with a firm, manly grip (144). In lieu of insisting that Kai conform to either blackness or whiteness, Toos stresses the importance of retaining ties to his Chinese heritage. Toos reappropriates "China" from a marker of his alterity to a positive reminder of Kai's ethnic heritage. Toos even teaches Kai how to laugh and thus passes on the important lesson on the "power of humor and camaraderie" (So 144); blitzed with a fear of the "Teeth God" for most of his boyhood, Kai joins in the pleasant sounds of delight that escape Toos, which remind Kai of the "distant laughter of his father" (*China* 110).

Most notably, Kai learns black English and even traditional black folk songs from Toos. His folksongs about mothers and trains and his "Papa ditty" mediate a re-union between Kai, fatherhood, and the Asian American male heritage of "railroad building" (Malcolm 418).¹⁰ Considering that Edna's reign of brutality hinged on her mastery of "standard" English, it becomes of exceeding significance that Toos equips Kai with an alternative form of English that allows Kai to enunciate his subjectivity. Accordingly, Kai's masculinity is reinforced interdependently with his verbal mastery of black English. Kai subverts hegemonic discourse by a verbatim reiteration of Toos' words: *I ain't fo' yo' pickin-on, no mo'!* (*China* 322). Kai's triumphant articulation of blackness disrupts the notion that America is demarcated by whiteness, and Lee reverberates this defiance in his

10) It is significant that Toos reconnects Kai to the Asian railroaders in that many Asian Americans regard the transcontinental railroad as one of the historical landmarks that bears witness to Asian American manhood and their presence across the American landscape.

novel, which is beset with the "Chinese *hwa*" and the "black patois of the Panhandle."

Bearing in mind that Lee prioritizes the affinity among people of color in *China Boy*, his inconsistent position regarding whiteness is problematic. We can discern Lee's unease at his portrayal of Kai as a black-identified subject, even as he approbates blackness as a seminal force in the construction of Asian American masculinity. For one, while he depicts Edna as the wicked stepmother par excellence, he at times adopts a conciliatory stance towards her. For one, there is no doubt in the reader's mind who the arch villain is in *China Boy*. Yet Edna's actions are vindicated to a certain degree by Lee's recognition of her as a victim of circumstance: Edna "had not wanted us," Kai concedes: "Her connection was to Father. Nor had she wanted stepmother status any more than any rational person might. She simply wanted a happy marriage" (65). Ironically, Lee makes Kai extenuate Edna's violence as that of a dissatisfied wife and unprepared mother; Edna's abuse, hence, is rationalized and sanitized by the words of her victim. Kai exonerates Edna by expressing sympathy for her "self-inflicted wounds" of hatred and isolation in an unfamiliar territory of Asian America. Kai renders Edna a fellow sufferer of "cultural chauvinism" (69). Edna is deserted in the racial margins with the others; her only link to this foreign land—her husband K. F.—takes lengthy and frequent business trips. Edna's ignorance of the Chinese culture makes her a target of ridicule and she is disgraced at her own wedding banquet. The other Chinese American wives slight her and she fears the streets and the neighbors in the Panhandle. The extremity of Edna's segregation renders her an "alien in *her own land*" (*italics mine*, 138). Accordingly, her injunction against the Chinese

language—as a “talisman for poverty, exclusion, isolation” (71)—is attributed to her growing apprehension for the unfamiliar. Edna contaminates Kai with her disdain for the “unfamiliar” and provokes his self-hate. Gazing at himself in the mirror, Kai spews vituperations that reiterate Edna’s vitriol: “You’re an ugly piece of a dark, squinty-eyed, fat-lip shit,” Kai tells his reflection (*Honor* 92). Having internalized the denigrating discourse of racism, Kai admits to his inferiority by noting that it is “not very merry” to be an Asian American (14).

Starting with his confounding leniency for Edna and his consumption of her racist discourse, I see Lee continue down a road of compromise, rather than of confrontation, with whiteness. Abandoning his initial critique of K. F.’s assimilationist stance, Kai restores K. F.’s status as the “most holy and fragile animals” whom he must aim to please; Kai ultimately comes to embrace his father’s survival strategy as a minority subject and chooses evasion over subversion of hegemonic oppression.¹¹⁾ Lee’s second novel casts further doubts about Lee’s perception of the black identified Kai in *China Boy*. In *Honor and Duty*, Lee gives an account of Kai’s West Point years. West Point replaces the ghetto as a constructive site in which Kai can legitimize not only his gender but also his national identity. A school for “only

11) Another way in which Lee skirts the issue at hand is through Kai’s affinity for Jewish Americans. In comparing Edna to the German SS, Kai parallels an Asian American’s circumstance with that of the Jews in Nazi Germany. Historically ascribed as black, Jewish Americans have also been circumscribed within the racial margins. At the same time, their externals set them apart from African Americans as the model minority. Kai hopes that if he is “really, very good,” he will be rewarded by coming back Jewish in his next lifetime (*China* 240); this indicates that Kai may have an inkling that being Jewish is even better than being black, given the former’s capacity to occupy dual position in the racial hierarchy (Malcolm 422). For Kai, the appeal of appropriating a Jewish American identity, then, lies in that it enables Kai to enjoy the best of both worlds: retain the constructive influence of black America on other people of color as well as enjoy the privilege of white America.

true Americans," West Point approximates America (*italics mine*, 30). Therefore, an access to its ivy halls places Kai on par with hegemonic men who comprise the student body. Uniformly white, male, American, West Pointers, notes Kai

averaged six feet in height and 700 on the verbal and math portions of the Scholastic Aptitude Test. [A majority of us were] student body presidents and varsity team captains, [...] Eagle Scouts. I thought all the tall, broad-shouldered, straight-nosed blond guys with good grades in America had come. Most were Protestants from middle-class homes with good skin and smooth consciences who had been the pride of their high schools. (54-5)

Kai appreciates the homogeneity that West Point effects: it is a "sanctuary" with "food, sports, an all-male faculty, and uniforms that made everyone look alike" (31). With his "wrong face, [...] wrong in color and culture," Kai is cognizant that he does not "fit the profile" (53, 55). Still Kai expresses his high hopes that West Point will allow a China boy and the white boys to transcend their racial differences and uniformly become cadets. Established by Washington and Jefferson, the archetypal fathers of hegemony, West Point itself becomes "the biggest freaking father in the world" that imparts the code of conduct by which American men live (364). In coming to West Point, K. F.'s dream school where his heroic best friend General Schwarzhedd attended, Kai embraces the idea of mirroring his father's assimilationist life. Kai even reconciles with his dying stepmother Edna. Kai redeems her to a certain extent by depicting Edna as a lonely woman who sincerely wanted to be a mother to him. In the end, Edna becomes a repository of the maternal presence in Kai's life; not only is she likened to Momma LaRue but comes to replace Mah-mee as his "real"

mother (354).

Upon entering this hotbed of hegemonic masculinity, Kai endeavors to disassociate himself from other minority subjects who may deter his entrance into American manhood. Arriving at West Point, Kai is welcomed by an African American janitor. While Kai appreciates the presence of another man of color, the initial greeting between a “Negro elder” and a “Chinese youth” is pervaded by a sense of farewell (2). The rest of the novel pertinently relays Kai’s deviation from his earlier identification with blackness. Kai voices regrets about:

[his] childhood campaign to become a successful Negro youth. [West Point] would hate my efforts at blackness, my eclecticism, my pure Asiatic blood. [...] This is not time to look like the United Nations rolled into a small, clucking rabbit. (13)

Shrugging off his identification with blackness as a youthful indiscretion of sorts, Kai claims that his earlier prioritization of black masculinity was an apt survival strategy during a *particular* moment in his life. Lee’s readers learn that Kai was amenable to altering his initial survival tactic once his family moved from the Panhandle to a predominantly white neighborhood: “[a]gain,” says Kai, “I mimicked, switching adjectives, gestures and attitudes, putting one more cultural mile between me and my Chinese youth and the fading borders of my recent past” as a black youth (48); in a word, Kai besmirches his acts of resistance as a fatuous masquerade of a defiant teen.

At West Point, the readers see Kai’s successful appropriation of a West Pointer identity. He comes to embody what the Academy stands for: “idealism, service, honor” (364). Kai’s embodiment of the values of

West Point, "a place that was all yang, male force" corresponds to the physical changes in Kai's newly masculinized body (415). Lee's readers and other characters common to both novels are struck by Kai's bodily transformation, remarking on his "massive size and gargantuan appetite" (Hawley 186). By the sheer bulk of his body, Kai combats the invisibility of Asian American male subjects. In this way, Kai's achievement of a hegemonic identity is immediate and absolute; returning to the Y after a year at the Academy, Kai realizes that he is "no longer one of them" (*Honor* 160).

Kai's departure from the Y signals a comparable move away from Toos, Momma LaRue, and Sippy Suds: his Panhandle patron saints. Even as Kai appreciates Toos's significance as a friend who had given him second chances, Kai's revisionary take on his friend relegates him to an effeminate role of a "blond fairy godmother in a pastel blue dress with a magic wand" (65). Sippy Suds (a.k.a. Deloitte) writes Kai a letter, to which he never responds. Although promising Momma LaRue he would not "drift out" on them, Kai loses touch with the LaRues. Kai loses "Momma's cup," which symbolizes her warm embrace and the "sanctuary of their apartment [...] with the sureness of a lifeguard throwing a rope" (70). The segregation between Kai and Toos, it would seem, is absolute. In rare moments in which Kai calls out to his old friend, Toos never responds. And coinciding with his break from the bulwarks of his troubled childhood, Kai reconciles with his father and accepts his invitation to "merge directly into the white tapestry of American history" (57). A real chance to be an extension of hegemony within his grasp, Kai no longer seems to counter against its conventions; in other words, Kai chooses to assimilate to whiteness, rather than endeavoring to subvert its racist rhetoric via an identification

with blackness.

Although Kai ultimately flunks out of West Point, it becomes the site of reconciliation between Kai and K. F., an agent of the dominant discourse: Kai realizes that in the end, all he wanted was his father's approval and such recognition is followed by the restoration of the Asian American father as the "phallic" father who "possess a fantasized degree of power and freedom" over the identity formation of an Asian American male subject (Chu 83); to a certain extent, the restoration of K. F. as the "phallic father" ensures Kai's potential to become one himself. The novel ends with father and son standing together on the balcony of their home. K. F., observes John C. Hawley, makes his first "happy affirmation" in the novel: "No ... we not jumping. We climbing up American ladder!" (*Honor* 422). Hawley concludes that Gus Lee successfully recreates, within an Asian American context, the "classic struggles of Oedipus and Telemachus [...] who seek to discover their fathers without killing them in the process or losing a secure sense of themselves as significant individuals" (184); Hawley's observation further legitimizes my contention that Lee's novels are, in essence, recapitulations of a Western master narrative about fathers and sons, which is indicative of Lee's fundamental accommodationist inclination.

Notwithstanding the recuperative significance of the final scene in *Honor and Duty*, such an ending is problematic in its evocation of the model minority ethos especially if we consider Lee's earlier investment in italicizing the power of subversion embedded in appropriating blackness. In other words, even as one can appreciate the restorative value inherent in the reconciliation between father and son on a *familial* level, Kai's desertion of his earlier affiliation to blackness

prompts accusations of his essentializing and expropriating blackness in order to serve his own purpose of subverting the effeminate stereotype of Asian American men; in so doing, Kai (and Lee) ultimately betrays the concerted efforts of racialized masculinities to subvert the oppressive forces of the hegemony. Christine So observes that Lee performs a balancing act between "reinforc[ing] American myths of blind inclusion" and mediating or even contradicting a nationalist rhetoric (141). It is So's contention that Lee, particularly in *China Boy*, uses humor strategically to "highlight the division between majority and minority cultures" and also Kai and Lee himself (142). So asserts that humor affords a means of expressing and releasing "cultural anxiety about the current multicultural agenda":

Lee's humor accomplishes a variety of seemingly contradictory objectives: it once again identifies and alters the inherently alien nature of Chinese-Americans; it confirms and ultimately closes the presumed cultural gulf between African Americans and Asian Americans; and it revises and yet assuages mainstream American fears about the unassimilability of both groups. (152)

According to So, Lee secures his own inclusion into mainstream America by ridiculing Kai's unattainable goal of becoming a black boy. In other words, Lee is "in" on the joke whereas Kai does not understand why his desire to transgress racial boundaries is met with scorn. In tandem, Lee highlights the insurmountable difficulties that Kai faces in becoming black so that he may appease mainstream American's anxiety over minorities and their successful integration into hegemonic discourse (So 147). In effect, Lee reinforces the concept of racial distinction in order to temper white America's apprehension of

the unfamiliar.

Though So's arguments are convincing to a certain extent, her analysis of Lee's endeavors for a "blind inclusion" into the mainstream at the risk of Kai's exclusion invalidates her observation about Lee's balancing act between assimilation and resistance to a "nationalist rhetoric" (141). Were we to take So's claim at face value, Lee not only assimilates to the dominant discourse but quashes Kai's attempts to resist against it by relegating them as anxiety-relieving devices for the mainstream. So's analysis prompts further consideration of what compels Lee to couch his assimilationist agenda within a narrative of a minority subject who alleges to resist hegemonic discourse by an identification with African Americans. To this end, we must also interrogate how a story of "bad-Asian-turned-good" is more effective in getting Lee "in" with the mainstream versus a straightforward story of a "good" minority who upholds a majoritarian discourse. In my estimation, Lee defeats his own purpose in his negotiation with whiteness by debarring Kai from hegemonic discourse. I partly attribute Lee's precarious negotiation to what I see as Lee's intentional conflation between Kai and himself; in other words, Lee and Kai cannot be on opposite sides of the divider between majority and minority cultures because they are inexorably connected by Lee's own admission that Kai's stories are based on the autobiographical details of his life.

It is evident that Lee's conflict with whiteness and the readers' unclarity regarding Lee's position derive from the novels' circumscription within the binary options of assimilation and resistance. If this is indeed the case, we must conceptualize ways in which to read Lee's novels beyond these polarizing positions. For one, the range and

complexity of Lee's black and white characters provides a more realistic representation of American society. And while communities are still racially demarcated in Lee's portrayal of America in the mid-twentieth century, Kai's motility, which affords him the ability to transgress racial boundaries, anticipates the obscuring of such barriers. Christine So also notes that Kai begins to deconstruct the binary by embracing a multicultural positionality. In *China Boy*, Kai is pressed to choose between being Chinese and being American. Kai devises an alternative in response to this dilemma, which has always plagued hyphenated Americans: Kai opts for a third option of being black in order to expose the limitations of the "either/or" racial categories that circumscribe Asian Americans. Admittedly, these observations do not fully redeem nor answer Lee's ambivalence towards the dyad of assimilation/resistance; nonetheless, I read Lee's attempts to conceive a productive coalition between Asian Americans and African Americans as a positive move within minority studies. Furthermore, Kai's reconnection to his Asian American cultural heritage by recuperating his relationship with his father augurs the construction of an Asian American ethos, which facilitates Kai's establishment of a strong sense of self and subsequently, of his masculinity.

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【Abstract】

Return of the “Great Absentee”: the Perilous
Positionality of Asian American Fatherhood in Gus
Lee’s *China Boy* and *Honor and Duty*

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This essays examines Gus Lee’s ambivalence towards Asian American fathering in the formation of Asian American masculine subjectivity. Rife with father figures for young Kai Ting, Lee’s two semi-autobiographical novels are constructive sites in which to parse the body paternal in relation to the masculinization of a “China boy.” In lieu of K. F., his defunct Asian immigrant father, Kai relies on his boxing coaches at the local YMCA and his neighborhood friend Toussaint (Toos) LaRue, in particular, to survive a troubled childhood in the black ghetto. In *China Boy* (1991), Kai comes to prioritize black expressions of masculinity and aspires to become a black boy like Toos. In *Honor and Duty* (1994), Kai enters West Point upon his father’s wishes; at West Point, arguably the quintessential hub of hegemonic men, Kai reconsiders his intial dependence on blackness to reclaim his masculinity and consequently shifts his allegiance from the other men of color to the fraternity of hegemonic men. Read in tandem, Lee’s two novels facilitate a constructive critique of the Asian American father and how he factors into the convoluted processes of minority identity formation.

Key Words

Asian American masculinity, fatherhood, minority identity formation, assimilation/ resistance, regenerative value of violence, the ghettoized space of the racial margins, representation of black-Asian conjunction, *China Boy*, *Honor and Duty*